

FLORA AND FAUNA

Caldwell County contains native plant and animal species from two different physiographic regions: the southern Blue Ridge Mountains, which extend from Virginia to northern Alabama, and the Piedmont, which lies east of the Blue Ridge Mountains and extends from southern New York to Alabama. With a substantial gradient in elevation, a varied topography, and the wide range of geology, Caldwell County supports a diverse set of natural communities as well as a high diversity of plants and animals.

Caldwell County ranks in the upper 50% of North Carolina's 100 counties both in the number of rare plant species and rare animal species present. There are currently 42 special status plant species and 19 special status animal species (as defined by NatureServe, USFWS, and tracked by NCNHP) recorded from Caldwell County (Tables 3 and 4). Of the 61 species tracked from Caldwell County, 20 are Federally-listed as Endangered, Threatened, or Species of Concern. Explanations of the ranks and statuses of rare plants and rare animals appear after each table.

Caldwell County contains significant populations of the State Endangered and Federal Species of Concern mountain heartleaf (*Hexastylis contracta*). It occurs in the northwestern portion of the county primarily within the Pisgah National Forest. Populations occurring in North Carolina (Henderson, Buncombe, and Caldwell Counties) are disjunct from the main range, which is located along the Tennessee-Kentucky state line on the Cumberland Plateau.

Another rare species of heartleaf found in Caldwell County is dwarf-flowered heartleaf (*Hexastylis naniflora*). This species' global range is 11 counties in North Carolina and 3 counties in South Carolina. It is Federally-listed as Threatened, with three known populations and two additional small occurrences found in Caldwell County. The best examples occur at Peaked Top Rare Plant Site, located west of the town of Lenoir and along Little Gunpowder Creek just off US 321, near the community of Sawmills.

Heller's blazing-star (*Liatris helleri*) is known from 21 populations worldwide (totaling approximately 3,000 known individuals). It occurs on high elevation rock outcrops in Caldwell County at Blowing Rock Cliffs and just over the county line at Grandfather Mountain. Heller's blazing-star is Federally and State-listed as Threatened.

Bent avens (*Geum geniculatum*) is known worldwide from only 15 populations, one in eastern Tennessee, and the rest in western North Carolina. It grows at high elevations, in forests and on streambanks and seepage slopes. It is found in Caldwell County at Grandfather Mountain. Bent avens is currently listed as a Federal Species of Concern and is State Threatened.

Several rare plant species that were documented historically from Caldwell County were either rediscovered or new populations were located during the inventory. The dwarf chinquapin oak (*Quercus prinoides*) was reported in the 1950's from credible sources. It was relocated along Rock